

Sunday School Hero or Suicide Bomber ? Reading Samson Responsibly

Strangely enough, utter repose covered his face, he looked the same as he had praying in his cell – except, there was something new in his expression. It was joy, joy like a mighty torrent.

I remember thinking: ‘This man is going to die. How can he be joyful ?’

Suddenly the officers roused themselves. Orders were shouted, and soldiers leapt forward to grab the slave.

Too late, far too late by now.

The pillars were falling, and with them the whole roof. The noise was indescribable. Everyone was screaming, and trying to get to safety.

No one but me survived, and I think myself blessed by the gods that I was not worse hurt.

The last thing I saw, before I became unconscious, was the slave. He had not moved from his spot between the pillars. His great head was lifted up, and his sightless face gazed aloft.

I heard him give a great cry of joy, as if he were welcoming his God, and then he died.

I swear I have never seen such peace and joy – yes and gratitude – on a human face. ¹

And although the Bible doesn’t say so, there are unconfirmed reports that Samson shouted “God is great” as the walls came tumbling down. ²

Most churchgoers know the story of Samson, and particularly its dramatic end, where the bound and blinded figure regains his strength and pulls down the temple killing both himself and the assembled Philistines. A typical response to the Samson story can be found in the book cited above, Phil Stanton’s devotional paperback *Samson: The Secret of His Strength* where he is described as a “great hero”.

To be fair to Stanton, and others like him, the writer of Hebrews 11 includes Samson in their “great cloud of witnesses”:

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophet who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³

And, of course, the Samson story is a staple of Sunday School, as can be seen for example in this extract from an online "Samson for Kids" lesson, where there is a clear sense that for the writer Samson is a prefiguration of Christ himself:

God used Samson to defeat the Philistines, the Israelites' enemies. Samson might seem like an unlikely person for God to use. He was prideful, had a bad temper, and disobeyed God. But God still used him and ultimately Samson brought God glory. Samson gave his life so that he could defeat the Philistines and the Israelites could be freed. In some ways Samson's story reminds us of Jesus. Jesus also died in order to save others. ⁴

Again, to be fair to the writers of the material, the idea that Samson is in some way a prefiguration of Christ is nothing new. Already in the early church, the Samson story was being read in a typological and symbolic sense and, as David Gunn puts it:

Allegory and typology, dominating early and medieval Christian interpretation of Samson, had the advantage of sidelining many problems with Samson's "literal" behaviour. ⁵

However, there is another way of looking at Samson. As one blog comment observes:

3000 people murdered in a religiously-inspired suicide attack that toppled a huge building? Gee, where have I heard that before ... ⁶

And Phil Stanton, in his fictionalised eyewitness account of Samson's death, recounts that "I heard him give a great cry of joy", words unsettlingly reminiscent of the C21 suicide bomber's cry of "God is Great!".

It is clear that Samson is a complex figure. Even those commentators who view him as an agent of God struggle with his self-interest and desire for revenge but end up concluding that his final (and fatal) achievement was to the glory of God. And it is this final achievement, so called, which is my focus here. What are we to do with this figure whose final act is so reminiscent of that of a modern day suicide bomber?

The question is not so much whether Samson would have recognised himself as a suicide-bomber but whether the Samson narrative lends (albeit unconscious or unintended) legitimacy to the worldview out of which the suicide bomber arises.

In the course of preparing to write this paper I asked a number of Anglican clergy whether they have ever made the connection between Samson and a suicide bomber and the almost universal response was “No, but now you mention it ...” My reason, therefore, for offering these thoughts is to encourage those with preaching and teaching responsibilities in the Christian community to reflect on this disturbing story and how we should react and respond to it in this world of religiously-inspired violence.

Christian Responses to Samson

Crenshaw notes that early Christian interpreters (Athanasius, Augustine) saw Samson as a saint, albeit a flawed one. For Gregory the Great, Samson’s problem was pride. By contrast, for Jerome it was lust. But for most of these early commentators there was no problem with Samson’s final act of violence; it was, rather, his reliance upon himself (rather than God) or his sexual license which was the real problem.⁷

However, Augustine resorts to sleight of hand to justify Samson’s suicide:

*And when Samson destroyed himself, with his enemies, by the demolition of the building, this can only be excused on the ground that the Spirit, which performed miracles through him, secretly ordered him to do so.*⁸

Centuries later, Martin Luther expressed admiration for Samson in his Table Talk. For Luther, Samson was a model of one who struck a blow for his god against the followers of “his” rival:

*In more than one passage Luther expressed his great wonder at the story of Samson, and at one point directly identified with him, wishing for an end similar to Samson's, where his death would bring disaster to the Turkish enemy.*⁹

Samson in the Commentaries

It is somewhat alarming that the commentaries, in the main, do not really engage with the violence of the Samson story. The Italian scholar J Alberto Soggin’s *OT Library* commentary devotes about half a page to a discussion of the person of Samson, before concluding that

*It is not possible to make a general evaluation of the person of Samson in the context of the biblical narratives.*¹⁰

Although he goes on to briefly identify two strands in a Christian approach to Samson (those who see him as a “religious hero with tragic elements” and others who come to an “essentially negative evaluation of him”¹¹), there is no attempt to face the questions raised by Samson’s end.

Similarly, Robert Boling’s *Anchor Bible* commentary devotes just a brief comment to Samson’s end where he notes that:

*The narrative makes the point that, while he ran afoul because of his own lusty self-interest, the consequent suffering evoked a new confession from him and he died honourably in the act of effecting Yahweh’s justice toward Philistia.*¹²

From an evangelical perspective the *New International Commentary* volume on Judges by Australian scholar Barry G Webb appears to let Samson completely off the hook as regards to ethical accountability. Webb notes that Samson grasps the pillars of the temple and observes the “cruciform position” with which he destroys the temple before concluding:

*It was not Samson’s finest hour in a moral or spiritual sense; it was too clouded with bitter self-interest for that. But it was certainly his greatest achievement ... for he had demonstrated the vulnerability of their leadership and Yahweh’s superiority over their God”*¹³

Yes indeed, but is this not also dangerously close to the rhetoric of the suicide bomber? Eyewitness reports of many instances of so-called “Islamic terrorism” mention the attackers’ shouts of *Allahu Akbar* (“God is Greatest”) just before the attack.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Webb warns that

*We must not reduce Samson to a mere warning against wilfulness, or an example of faith; he is much, much more. He is a forerunner of the greatest Saviour of all.*¹⁵

Perhaps a more cautious approach to Samson can be found in Carolyn Pressler’s *Westminster Bible Commentary* volume. Although she warns that

One ought not exaggerate the negative nature of Samson’s character

because, as she notes,

the storytellers do not explicitly censure him ...

she goes on to suggest that

*a more convincing interpretation views the Samson stories as illustrations of God secretly at work to liberate Israel from its oppressors.*¹⁶

The only commentary which I have seen that explicitly raises the question of Samson the suicide bomber is the recent commentary in the Liturgical Press *Wisdom Commentary* series by Mercedes L Garcia Bachmann. This features a promising sidebar by Renate Jost entitled "Samson and the Suicide Bombs Today" which attempts to address the question which preoccupies us here. Jost asks: "can Samson be identified as the first terrorist attacker in world history?" At first sight, she concedes, it would seem so, since Samson died with his enemies, the Philistines. However she goes on to dismiss the connection, and ultimately fails to address the disturbing resonances between the story of Samson and the suicide bombers of today.

Although it might be anachronistic to see Samson as a prototype suicide bomber in terms of either his historical or narrative context, from our perspective the connection is easily made and needs to be addressed. Perhaps the problem is that Jost's own question ("can Samson be identified as the first terrorist attacker in world history?") starts with the "historical" Samson rather than what his story says to our twenty first century world.

Whilst this makes no claim to represent an exhaustive survey of the commentaries currently available on Judges, it aims to be representative, and to point to the alarming dearth of serious engagement with the questions and concerns raised by the story of Samson and his spectacular end. Christian commentators continue either to commend Samson or to ignore the questions raised by his life and death. The analogy with Christ, and "spiritualisation" of his violent struggles enable them to evade the hard questions posed by a more face-value reading of the narratives.

Towards a Responsible Reading of Samson

My concern here is with what the Christian community does with the story of Samson and, in particular, his spectacular end. The problem for Christian interpreters of Samson is that he does not just appear in the Hebrew Bible but is listed amongst the "great cloud of witnesses" in Hebrews 11, and there is a significant strand in Christian tradition which would see Samson as in some way prefiguring Christ.

However, as Brian Wicker suggests in his article "Samson Terroristes":

*We don't have to take Samson seriously, as the Letter to the Hebrews did.*¹⁷

That being said, on another level we do have to take Samson with the utmost seriousness. As Wicker concludes:

*all I can say is that the next time somebody tries to re-tell the Samson legend he or she had better put the rights of the Philistine crowd ... at the centre of the action. Otherwise the endless revenge will continue, and the evil of Adam's sin will not be overcome.*¹⁸

So the **first** step towards a responsible reading of Samson is to take seriously the very real questions and concerns posed by the narrative instead of spiritualising them away or just ignoring them. Responsible reading of the Bible starts here, by facing up to the challenging and uncomfortable questions posed by our sacred texts. The story of Samson is not the only place in the Bible where serious ethical questions are raised, but it is one of the most disturbing and one which merits attention in both pulpit and classroom.

Once we have recognised the very real questions posed by Samson, the **second** step towards a responsible reading is to re-read the story at face value, putting aside what we may have been brought up to believe about its true or hidden meaning, and experiencing the full horror of what it portrays.

In an article entitled "Terrorism: From Samson to Atta", political scientist Shadia Drury raises the question that I have been exploring here. She notes what she calls an "uncanny resemblance" between the biblical story of Samson's suicide and the 9/11 terrorist attack:

*Morally, speaking the two crimes were identical. In both cases innocent victims were buried alive in the rubble – innocent people met a gruesome death that they could not have anticipated or deserved. It is difficult not to conclude that Samson was as much of a terrorist as Atta. Yet, we regard Atta as a criminal, and the incarnation of evil, but we go along with the Bible in portraying Samson as a hero. Is there any difference between them that would justify such radically different assessments?*¹⁹

Drury goes on to acknowledge that

It may be argued that Samson ... was merely an instrument of God's will ... [sacrificing] his own life in order to carry out the justice of God.

But, she continues,

*If we accept this excuse for Samson, we must also accept it for Atta.*²⁰

I find it impossible to argue with Drury's reading of the Samson story. The problem, it seems, is that we make excuses for Samson. Because we read of him in the context of our sacred texts, we seek to evade or neutralise the very real questions his story raises. What is needed, once we come face to face with Samson, is not just more attempts to understand what his story means in the context of the history of salvation (important as this may be), but suggestions as to how we are to read his story responsibly in this world of suicide bombers and international terrorism.

Drury's reading of the Samson story, which is also my own, brings us to the **third** step towards a responsible reading. We need to recognise that our blind spot with regard to Samson is for the simple reason that, in narrative terms, he is on our side. As Drury puts it,

Once the world is understood in these terms it becomes clear why Samson is a hero and Atta is a villain. Samson is on our side. That is all. ²¹

Approached in this way, the Samson story looks rather different. It is clear that "ours" is not the only reading, and that it leads to some very serious blind spots in our understanding of the narrative.

Reading Samson Responsibly in Church

Along with all the other violent and sometimes genocidal narratives in the Bible, we cannot, and dare not, ignore Samson. Even if most biblical commentators and churchgoers continue to see Samson as in some sense a hero of the faith, others have made the connection between the last of the Judges and today's suicide bombers, and we cannot ignore their challenge. Indeed, I believe it would be irresponsible to do so.

As Philip Jenkins puts it in his book *Laying Down the Sword, Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses*:

Is someone looking for a text to justify suicide terrorism? The Qur'an offers nothing explicit, beyond general exhortations to warfare in the name of God. Some passages of the Bible, in contrast, seem expressly designed for this purpose. Think of the hero Samson, blinded and enslaved in Gaza, but still prepared to pull down the temple upon thousands of his persecutors ... Could a text offer better support for a modern-day suicide attack, in Gaza or elsewhere ? ²²

In practise, a responsible reading of the Samson story means preaching and teaching which is open about these challenges, and encourages the Christian community to engage with them.

For just as religious language often serves to conceal social and political realities, so too do religious texts. And so we have to look behind the familiar words or stories with an eye to the human realities they might be concealing or that we might not be noticing. For example, a responsible reading of the Samson story will refuse to make excuses or evasions to justify his fatal action. In the world of the narrative, Samson's final act would appear to be motivated solely by personal vengeance. According to the text, Samson's next to final reported words are a prayer:

*Then Samson called to the LORD and said, 'Lord GOD, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.'*²³

We have already seen that Augustine has to resort to sleight of hand, evoking a secret command of the Spirit of God, in order to justify Samson's suicide attack, and that numerous commentators since have sought to justify the unjustifiable in a whole variety of ways.

A responsible reading will not flinch from the horrific reality of three thousand people dead in an act of revenge, albeit justified in religious terms as the defeat of one god (Dagon) by another (Yahweh). One reading of the Samson story might, therefore, raise the question of revenge, and the dangers of using talk of God to justify our own desire for revenge. Another reading might invite a congregation to try to identify themselves with Samson's victims – how would **they** tell his story? Yet another reading might focus on the "us" and "them" mentality of the story, and of so much of our religious and political rhetoric.

Approaching the story of Samson, we are indeed blinded to the disturbing reality of the narrative because he is "one of us", even more so because he is named (and implicitly commended) in the New Testament. But this cannot be an excuse to avoid looking critically at his story, and to ask how it might be read responsibly in today's world. With this in mind, I have suggested three steps towards a responsible reading of the Samson story. These steps could be replicated for any number of biblical stories and narratives.

At the end of the day, it is perhaps a pity that the story of Samson doesn't end in the way Regina Spektor puts it in her song "Samson", where the eponymous figure simply went back to bed and was forgotten by history and unmentioned by the Bible. Sadly, that is not the case, and so our task is to engage honestly and openly with this violent and disturbing story and to find ways in which it can be put to positive and life-affirming purposes. I hope that what I have suggested here might begin to open up some possibilities for honest yet constructive engagement with Samson in our churches.

-
- ¹ Phil Stanton, *Samson: The Secret of Strength* (Kingsway, 1996), p. 157
- ² <https://dwindlinginunbelief.blogspot.com/2009/11/gods-53rd-killing-samson-kills-3000-in.html>
- ³ Hebrews 11: 32 – 34 (NRSV)
- ⁴ Ministry to Children: Samson for Kids (Judges 13-16) Sunday School Lesson (2016 update)
<https://ministry-to-children.com/samson-for-kids-lesson/>
- ⁵ David Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries* (Wiley Blackwell, 2004), p. 175
- ⁶ Comment on <https://dwindlinginunbelief.blogspot.com/2009/11/gods-53rd-killing-samson-kills-3000-in.html>
- ⁷ James Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored* (Westminster / John Knox, 2005), pp. 138 - 139
- ⁸ Augustine, *City of God* (G. R Evans (ed), Henry Bettenson (Translator) Penguin Classics (2003), p. 32
- ⁹ Patrick Hayden-Roy, 'Unmasking the Hidden God: Luther's Wundermanner' (*Lutherjahrbuch*, 82 2015, pp. 91-92
- ¹⁰ J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges* (SCM Old Testament Library, Second Edition 1987), p. 258
- ¹¹ Soggin, p. 258
- ¹² Robert G Boling, *Judges* (Anchor Bible, Doubleday 1975), p. 253
- ¹³ Barry G Webb, *The Book of Judges* (New International Commentary on the OT, Eerdmans 2012), pp. 414, 415)
- ¹⁴ Wajahat Ali, "I Want 'Allahu Akbar' Back", *New York Times*, November 1 2017
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/opinion/manhattan-truck-attack-akbar-terrorism.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>
- ¹⁵ Barry G Webb, 'A Serious Reading of the Samson Story' (*Reformed Theological Review* 54, 1995,) pp. 110 - 120
- ¹⁶ Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges & Ruth* (Westminster Bible Companion, Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 124
- ¹⁷ Brian Wicker, 'Samson Terroristes' *New Blackfriars* (January 2003), p. 57
- ¹⁸ Wicker, Samson Terroristes / p. 58
- ¹⁹ Shadia Drury, 'Terrorism: From Samson to Atta' (*Arab Studies Quarterly* 25: 1 & 2, Winter / Spring 2003), p. 1
- ²⁰ Drury, p. 2
- ²¹ Drury, p. 5

²² Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword, Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (HarperOne, 2011), p. 9

²³ Judges 16: 28 (NRSV)

Online material accessed January 2019

Peter C King – March 2019